United Nations E/CN.17/1999/9

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
13 April 1999

Original: English

Commission on Sustainable Development
Seventh session
19–30 April 1999
Item 8 of the provisional agenda*
High-level meeting

Emerging issues for the high-level meeting

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In previous years the Secretary-General has prepared reports for the high-level meetings of the Commission on Sustainable Development that attempted to highlight the main policy issues on the agenda of a given session of the Commission and also the key challenges to be addressed in the future.

2. Given the fact that the participants in the high-level meetings at the seventh session of the Commission are expected to focus their attention on "elements for decisions" emanating from the meetings of Commission's ad hoc working groups, the Secretary-General has decided to limit his contribution to the debate to only two types of issues, namely, specific policy options under discussion related to ocean governance and the main challenges on the agenda of future sessions.

Ocean governance

3. The vastness of the world's oceans, which cover 71 per cent of the earth's surface, and their critical importance in supplying an abundance of natural resources essential for human survival, indicate their crucial role in the achievement of sustainable economic, social and environmental well-being, including efforts to eradicate poverty and ensure food security for present and future generations. But, while more than half — and perhaps as much as two thirds — of the world's population live in coastal areas, coastal ecosystems are increasingly vulnerable to threats related to human development which are estimated to place more than half the world's coasts at a high or moderate potential risk of degradation. Coral reefs, often called the rainforests of the sea because of their valuable ecosystems, are particularly vulnerable to the pressure of human activities. Moreover, at least 60 per cent of major fish stocks are either fully exploited or overfished.

4. As noted during the meeting of the Commission's Inter-sessional Ad Hoc Working Group on Oceans and Seas and on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (New York, 1–5 March 1999), there seems to be broad agreement by the international community on a few key concerns affecting oceans and seas. These include the conservation, management and sustainable use of marine living resources; the prevention of pollution and degradation of the marine environment from land-based and other activities; the scientific understanding of the way in which the oceans and seas interact with the world climate system, particularly in comprehending and responding to events such as the El Niño phenomenon; and the need to enhance international cooperation in support of action at the national and regional levels in developing countries and those with economies in transition, including through the

* E/CN.17/1999/1.

99-10452 (E) 170499

provision of financial and technical assistance and the transfer of environmentally sound technologies. It is also understood that the complex nature of the marine environment requires an integrated and multi-sectoral approach to the management of oceans and coastal areas, including the priority areas identified by the Commission and other forums. Such an approach must incorporate economic, social and environmental solutions.

5. Ocean governance and the coordination of ocean-related activities, both by Governments and by international organizations, are also the subject of considerable discussion, especially in recent months in the context of the 1998 International Year of the Ocean and its related activities. While fully endorsing the fact that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea sets out the overall legal framework within which all actions in this field must be considered, there is a growing appreciation that the integrated concept of ocean space should be reflected in the way that the United Nations considers ocean issues. A number of suggestions in this regard were made by delegations at the meeting of the Working Group and are contained in the annex to the Co-Chairmen's summary of the discussions (see E/CN.17/1999/17). It is hoped that the Commission's focus on oceans and seas at its present session will provide an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing global debate on these and other critical issues. The conclusions of the Commission on oceans and seas will be further discussed later in 1999 when the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session considers the item entitled "Oceans and the law of the sea".

Preparations for the five-year review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

6. Later in 1999, the General Assembly at its special session will undertake a comprehensive review of progress achieved in the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.[1] The Commission, at its seventh session, has the important task of acting as the preparatory body for the special session. Accordingly, the Commission is expected to prepare a draft final document of the special session and to make recommendations on its organizational modalities. The Secretary-General has prepared several reports assessing progress in the implementation of the Programme of Action, which, together with the outcome of the meeting between the representatives of Governments of small island developing States and prospective donors, served as the basis for discussion during the meeting of the Working Group (1–5 March 1999).

Preparations for the ninth session of the Commission on matters related to energy and sustainable development

7. The General Assembly at its nineteenth special session stressed the significance of the issue of energy in the context of sustainable development. The Commission will consider the issue of energy at its ninth session, in 2001, which, in line with Agenda 21,[2] should contribute to sustainable energy for all. Recognizing the complexities and interdependencies inherent in addressing energy issues within the context of sustainable development, the General Assembly has decided that preparations for the Commission's ninth session should be initiated at the Commission's seventh session and should utilize an open-ended intergovernmental group of experts on energy and sustainable development to be held in conjunction with the inter-sessional meetings of the eighth and ninth sessions of the Commission. The Secretary-General attaches great importance to high-quality preparations for the Commission's deliberations on energy and has prepared a report on that issue (E/CN.17/1999/8) which contains suggestions on the possible organization of the preparatory process and outlines the expected contributions to this endeavour by organizations of the United Nations system.

Land and Agriculture

8. At its eighth session, in 2000, the Commission will address as its sectoral theme the integrated planning and management of land resources and will focus on agriculture as the economic sector to be discussed. Chapters 10 and 14 of Agenda 21 provide, respectively, the main background for these themes, but chapters 2–8, 11–37 and 40 were also identified by the General Assembly as relevant to an integrated discussion of the issues. Moreover, poverty and consumption and production patterns are to be considered as "overriding issues" (see General Assembly resolution S-19/2, annex).

9. The major objective of sustainable agriculture and rural development is to increase food production in a sustainable way and enhance food security (Agenda 21, chap. 14, para. 14.2). Discussions on this theme at the eighth session might focus on national and international policies to increase agricultural productivity, while preventing and reversing land degradation, through the development and dissemination of improved technologies, information and

education, improved incentives and market access, and the development of rural infrastructure and institutions.

10. The objective of integrated land management is to provide the greatest sustainable benefits from land resources, including environmental, social and economic benefits deriving from soils, minerals, water and biota (Agenda 21, chap. 10). Discussions of land management at the eighth session might focus on the integrated management and planning of agricultural and non-agricultural land, including forests, watersheds, protected eco-systems and settlements, so as to meet the growing needs of rural and urban populations for food, water and forest products, while protecting essential ecosystems and ecological services.

11. Rural populations in developing countries remain disproportionately poor and undernourished. Consumption and production patterns of the rural poor are often unsustainable due to lack of access to modern energy sources, education and health services, appropriate technologies, transportation and communication infrastructure, and credit. The discussions of both agriculture and integrated land management could, therefore, address the specific needs of the hungry poor, taking into consideration the poverty eradication objectives of the international community, as well as the commitments of the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the Plan of Action adopted by the World Food Summit in 1996,[3] which call for a minimum target of halving the number of undernourished people in the world by 2015.

12. Consideration of these two closely related themes should be planned and organized in an integrated manner. Preparation of such an integrated discussion at the eighth session will be facilitated by the fact that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) acts as the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development task manager for both chapters 10 and 14. A major inter-sessional event which is expected to provide the Commission at its eighth session with input on both themes is an international conference on the multifunctional character of agriculture and land, organized by FAO and the Government of the Netherlands. The conference is to be held in Maastricht, the Netherlands from 13 to 17 September 1999.

Forests

13. At its eighth session, the Commission will consider the final report of the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests. The report will reflect the outcome of the Forum on issues such as implementation of the proposals for action of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, the need for financial resources, matters related to trade and environment, transfer of environmentally sound technology, as well as international institutional arrangements and recommendations for further action on establishing an intergovernmental negotiation process on new arrangements and mechanisms or a legally binding instrument on all types of forests.

Cross-sectoral cluster: financial resources/trade and investment/economic growth

14. The impact of the recent financial crisis on the economic situation in a large number of developing countries has demonstrated very clearly that financial resources and mechanisms will continue to play a crucial role in the implementation of Agenda 21. Therefore, particular importance will be attached to the discussion of financial means of implementation at the eighth session. In view of the crisis with regard to private capital flows and the further decline in official development assistance (ODA) since 1997, it will be necessary to again demonstrate that ODA is a main source of external funding for developing countries, particularly those in Africa and the least developed countries, and that the fulfilment of all financial commitments of Agenda 21 must be an integral part of the ODA reform discussion. At the same time, it will be necessary to assess the impact of the recent financial crisis on sustainable development finance in developing countries. In this context it will also be useful to further analyse the impact of indebtedness on the pursuit of sustainable development and assess recent new international initiatives to resolve the debt problem. As far as financing for the implementation of Agenda 21 from countries' own public and private sectors is concerned, it may be useful to focus the discussion at the eighth session on the particular problems of developing countries in the current economic situation and continue the discussion held at previous sessions on new policy approaches in both developed and developing countries. In this regard, it may also be useful to devote some time to the discussion of innovative financial mechanisms in various sectors. In connection with the preparation of the documentation for the eighth session, the convening of an expert group meeting on financial issues of Agenda 21 is planned.

15. Regarding international trade, investment and economic growth, it may be recalled that in 1997, at the nineteenth special session of the General Assembly, Governments agreed that in order to accelerate economic growth, poverty eradication and environmental protection, particularly in developing countries, there was a need to establish conditions that would enable all countries to benefit from globalization. It was also emphasized that trade

liberalization should be accompanied by environmental and resource management policies in order to realize its full potential contribution to improved environmental protection and the promotion of sustainable development. In view of the fact that a new round of multilateral trade negotiations will be launched in 2000, the deliberations of the Commission at its eighth session will be particularly timely and should build on the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, in which it is stated, *inter alia*, that decisions on further liberalization of trade should take into account effects on sustainable development (Assembly resolution S-19/2, annex, para. 29 (b)). The more specific issues can probably be clustered along the following lines: (a) contribution of foreign direct investment (FDI) to enhanced environmental awareness and management capacity in developing countries; (b) creation of a number of environmental problems in the wake of increased FDI; (c) contribution of FDI with respect to compliance with provisions of multilateral environmental agreements; and (d) facilitating and complicating factors with respect to exports of developing countries to countries members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Notes

[1] *Report of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Bridgetown, Barbados, 25–6 May 1994* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.94.I.18 and corrigenda), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

[2] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3–14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda), resolution 1, annex II.

[3] FAO, *Report of the World Food Summit, Rome, 13–17 November 1996, Part One* (WFS 96/REP), appendix.